IS POST MODERNISM FAILING?

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> The decade is half over, but already one begins to feel the peculiar sensation of looking back on the art of the '80s. How, in America, have its frequent miseries balanced out against its episodic splendors? The end of a century - and even more, the end of a millennium - brings anxiety with it: the unavoidable doubts and mannerisms of the fin de siecle, when every kind of stylistic bubble rises to the cultural surface, swells and bursts with a soft plop and a whiff, while marsh lights flicker and the cultural promoters croak their Aristophanic chorus. The SoHo Tar Pits: heaven for the market, purgatory (or limbo, anyway) for judgment.[1]

It is 1988, Robert Hughes is still with us, and so are the SoHo Tar Pits. His poetic condemnation of Post-Modernism hovers above the streets of New York: SoHo, the lower "East Side," and Times Square, like a squadron of vultures waiting for an antelope to die. Life in America has not changed a lot since 1985; Reagan is still the President and Wheel of Fortune is still a popular game show.

In the "world" of art, the same band of artists dominate the Post-Modern "scene": David Salle, Robert Longo, Sherrie Levine, Mike Bidlo, Cindy Sherman, Keith Haring, and Kenny Scharf (just to name a few). Artists of the "doodle," reproduction, and Saturday morning cartoon...an art world filled with Woody Woodpeckers. Art in America still proceeds under the stylistic auspiciousness of Post-Modernism -- a catch-all term for such "diverse" styles as Neo-Expressionism, Neo-Funk, Graffiti Art, and Fun Art.

If insight into a particular time, place, or event can be found in its language, then it is difficult to define Post-Modernism, with a language filled with such "buzz words" as hype, media icon, fun, fashion, and networking. After all the research and "thinking," after all the books, articles, interviews, reviews, names, dates, places, the only thing left is the essence of Post-Modernism...an essence of failure. Post-Modernism is failing...failing to "uphold" a "sacred" responsibility to remain "true" to its history, to criticize, and to lead. Post-Modernism forgets its historical duty to continue the growth of art, it does not criticize itself or its culture, and it fails to lead its "people."

Beyond the superficial level of "shows," parties, articles in the The New York Times "Arts" section, and bank accounts, there is a "higher" place...a place where the air is thin and the going is difficult...but it's a place where the view is tremendous, "within" as well as "without." Picasso spent a lifetime up there and DeKooning is still wandering around there, close to the top. But the Post-Modern artist is at the base of this mountain. He seems stuck at the bottom and can't (or won't) go beyond the level of "showing" at Gallery A on Monday and at Gallery B on Friday, a five day, 40 hour week job...an art job.

Post-Modernism has generated its share of literature, a few books, a lot of articles, and a chapter or two in various art history text books. These publications spend some

time and a few pages (or two hundred), and explore the Post-Modern concept and imagery, say of perhaps...a Robert Longo construction of glass guitars, or a Ronnie Cutrone painting of a decapitated chicken. A lot of the time (except for Robert Hughes and a few like him) Post-Modern criticism focuses on description, either on composition (drawing, color, etc.), on source (Jackson Pollock, Micky Mouse, etc.), or "the scene", like Peter Frank and Michael McKenzie, in their book New, Used, and Improved-Art For the '80s, when they describe the "Times Square Show" (1980): "Even before you entered, the mood was set by carnival music and barkers' cries broadcast into the street..."[2] Many of the books and articles consulted in writing this paper are "heavy" on description and "light" on evaluation. Very few critics venture to give a critical opinion focusing on the validity of a particular artist or work. It would have been a lot more helpful if a critic, along with describing a painting as big, red, and filled with cartoon figures, could have also said whether it was valid or not.

Post-Modernism is contemporary, with a life span barely ten years old. Its "works" are fresh, just out of the studio. Post Modernism has roots in the Pop Art Movement of the '60s, both sharing a common interest in American popular culture. Several Post-Modern artists, like Ronnie Cutrone, who worked for Warhol for a little over ten years, started working within the framework of Pop Art. The Post-Modern

artist has even been called a "Neo-Popster."[3] Also, Post-Modernism grew out of a defiance to Conceptual Art of the '70s; like Pop Art's reaction to Abstract Expressionism. Peter Frank and Michael McKenzie say that, "with the advent of the Neo-Popsters, art emerged from a decade of daunting diffidence and esoteric experiment, becoming more approachable and more active" along with giving "an art world (once again) not only something to think about, but also something to look at."[4] Post-Modernism is the resurrection of the image, in a narrative fashion, from such sources as art history, TV, and pornography. Its stars are the so-called baby boomers born after 1950, raised on corn flakes and a TV, with an interest in the effects of a popular culture, such as post card reproductions of a Pollock, John Wayne, and Mr. Peanut, on Americans.

In form, Post-Modernism is a "doodle," a collection of cartoon imagery, old stoneware, and "forgery" plastered across a canvas, with little concern for composition (color usage, drawing, or anything else); it is merely a bundle of images, marks, skewered across a canvas or wall. Julian Schnabel paints like he is blind and Jonathan Borofsky likes to fill a canvas up with numbers, starting with a particular number and then continuing in sequence (1,2,3,4 etc.). Keith Haring, described as "one part Klee, one part graphic design, and one part doodle," takes his hard sinuous line and fills a room with it (floors, walls, and ceiling), like his environment at the "Pop Shop," in SoHo.[5] This is the

story of Post-Modernism: ten years old, the son of Pop Art, who dislikes conceptualizing and drawing...who spends its time playing around with cartoons and post cards.

The heart and soul of Post-Modernism lies in its borrowed imagery. Robert Hughes describes this best with his statement:

> A glutted media based eclecticism being the order of the day, artists shape their means to it. Their main "strategy" is "appropriation" or image scavenging. A process somewhat different from the traditional ways in which Western Art has always quoted other art.

In the language of Post-Modernism, appropriation is the key word, the borrowing of ideas or images from either the past or present: art history, TV, cartoons, movies, etc., with subject matter originating from such sources as a Pollock painting to the Jetsons. Artists like David Salle, Robert Longo, and Mike Bidlo do this: Salle creates images of women in the "wide open" fashion of a men's magazine. Longo paints giant canvases reminiscent of movie stills and Bidlo copies original artworks, like a Pollock, almost stroke for stroke.

Post-Modern appropriation breaks down into two patterns. First, literal copying, which is what Sherrie Levine does when she takes a photograph of a Walker Evans original; the concept being the effect of a reproduction. The second pattern is that of eclectic quotation, or borrowing. Post-Modernism finds its subject and its inspiration from media reflected-images, and art history. Ronnie

Cutrone, sometimes uses Woody Woodpecker as a dominant image in his paintings. David Salle combines art history and TV. His transparent images are found in Francis Picabia, and his women look out at us with the same eyes found in soap operas and "soft core" videos. Both "literal copying" and "eclectic quotation" are the appropriative arm of Post-Modernism, and within these lies Post-Modern's failure.

Appropriation has always found itself in art. Picasso borrowed from Classicism, utilizing it as a recurrent theme. For example, "In a remarkable text in which he paid tribute to Picasso, George Bataille identified with Mithraic cult of the bull and the myth of Icarus...:"[8] Works such as the The Fall of Icarus (1958), War (1952), and Ulysses and the Sirens (1947) express Picasso's appropriation from Greek Art and culture. He also borrowed from specific works like Poussin's Bacchanal or Valazques's Las Meninas (44 versions). William DeKooning found inspiration with Picasso and Cubism: the flattening of a plane, the dissolution of positive/negative space, etc., and Larry Rivers looked to Emanuel Leutze's painting Washington Crossing the Delaware and came up with his own version of that historical event.

The appropriation of art by other artists is part of the nature of art. Artists like Picasso, DeKooning, and Rivers use appropriation as a spring board, a synthesis of past works, the present and their own individual styles in creating art that transcends their sources, pushing art in a continuous and growing fashion, like the growth of a tree.

After a hundred years, a tree has grown from a seed to that of a large trunk that fades into thousands of branches and leaves, perhaps pushing a hundred feet into the sky. The last leaf, at the end of the top most branch, is just as much a part of the whole of a tree as the deepest root. Now the whole of art is like this tree. Greek Art, Impressionism, or DeKooning's Women I are like the roots, branches, and leaves of a tree, existing as a dynamic, living entity that is art itself.

Post-Modernism fails in the sense that it doesn't contribute to the "whole" of art. When Sherrie Levine photographs a photograph of an original, like her copy of a Walker Evans photograph, titled After Evans she is concerned with the idea of a "reproduction." She also reproduces "masterpieces," like a Mondrian, in a post card format; i.e., After Mondrian. Mike Bidlo paints exact replicas of painting by artists such as Matisse, Picasso, or Pollock, as well as staging performances of past events of the art world: Yves Klien's Nude-As-Paintbrushes performance, and Jackson Pollock's "infamous" urination in Peggy Guggenheim's fireplace. Bidlo sets out to "examine, celebrate, and deflate" the objects and events of modern art.[9] Cindy Sherman takes photographs that are images from the media, in a movie still format, focusing on Hollywood cliches: horror films, science-fiction, and fantasy.

These artists, Levine, Bidlo and Sherman, simply mirror the activity of art. When they take a Mondrian or a movie

still they don't do anything with it. They echo, they don't create. They don't add to the sum of art, they just reproduce it. The past or present is not taken and filtered, and then built upon, but rather just played with. These artists (and others like them) merely play with the concept of copying and borrowing in a rhetorical fashion, like a philosophy class at a university geared towards discussing questions such as, "If a tree falls in a forest with no one around, does it make a sound?" Who cares about whether trees make sounds when they fall? And in that same vein, what's the importance of just a copy or a borrowed image? Perhaps what is more important is Pollock's inquiry into the spirit of life or the effects of TV on a culture. Artists like Levine, Bidlo, and Sherman do hardly nothing with a reproduction or a cartoon. They don't build upon art, add to it, they just reproduce it. Their artworks look like art, but there is no connection with art as a living, expandable entity. Art must connect with itself. A future painting must grow out of a present painting that grew out of a past painting, it cannot be an empty disconnected canvas covered with pigment and some lines, existing as nothing more than a borrowed image. Post-Modernism doesn't go far enough, art should do more than just copy.

Post-Modernism fails in another respect; it fails to critique. Herbert Marcuse explicitly defines the responsibility of the artist as:

> 1. (Art must)...invoke the need for hope - a need rooted in the new consciousness embodied in the work of art.
>
> 2. The transcendence of immediate reality shatters the reified objectivity of established social relations and opens a new dimension of experience: rebirth of the rebellious subjectivity.[10]

Unfortunately, Post-Modernism fails in both respects. Again, the key lies in their "appropriation." When Keith Haring presents a painting such as Untitled (1986) in the Post Modern style of an all-over composition with stylized figures of dancing figures borrowed from non-Western cultures, and the decorative patterning and flattened cartoon-like figures trapped inside a TV-like square, he doesn't have anything to say about his own culture. Haring's work doesn't "shatter established social relations," America's obsession with material goods.[11] American economic structure depends, for the most part, on consistent consumption of Fords, VCRs, dishwashers, socks, shoes, etc. Now popular culture acts as a manipulative device that persuades, challenges, shames, and tricks Americans into buying more and more, even if they don't need or want, a certain "good," and in some cases the product is even dangerous to them: i.e., cigarettes.

When Magnum jumps into his Firebird, TV viewers see a handsome and smart man sitting in an expensive car. In American popular culture, Magnum is the ideal male, and when the 20 million or so Americans see this, they receive an image with which they try and associate. They may think

(consciously or unconsciously) that, I'm not as good looking as Magnum, one down. I'm not really that smart, two down. But I can buy the Firebird, and one out of three ain't bad. In American popular culture, there's always some consumer object (or thought) somewhere in the picture, whether it be a Michael J. Fox drinking a Pepsi, or Forbes talking about his Harley, that says buy, buy, buy...

With Haring, art is fun, but it's also a one-way ticket to the American Dream. But in reality, the American Dream is a myth...a myth of better times. The American Dream is an illusionary ideal of wealth and power, but it's a strong ideal; it keeps Americans stuck in meaningless jobs and tract houses out in the suburbs. Haring doesn't criticize the American Dream, he embraces it. Haring's works are objects and nothing else, no statement, no expression, no search inside or out, just marks on a canvas or wall that he sells or puts in his own store; "The Pop Shop." Frank and McKenzie say that, "Haring comes off less a trinket-hunter or a politician than he does an art world Santa Claus, eager to bring the gift of fun to all."[12]

Another example is the work of Robert Longo, who takes his imagery (or form) from the movies. His large scale canvases look like a giant screen. In his painting Untitled (White Riot Series), Longo's image is that of "white " people, dressed like they just came from Wall Street, rioting, bodies twisting and turning, struggling with one another. It's a voyeuristic peak through the eyes of a

movie (or video) camera. This large-scale canvas reflects, "the scale of his essential subject: the American consciousness industry, and the way it grouts every cranny of public life."[13] A feeling one receives is like something from the National Enquirer, a characteristic feeling of a front page photograph of Sean Penn punching a photographer, which is a sort of pandering to an art world. Longo criticizes to an extent, but it turns into an image as superficial as the society he is critiquing. To create a superficial image and then say it is an expression of superficiality doesn't work. Longo doesn't shatter established social reality, this perhaps lies in his content, but a successful artwork requires both, the realization of concept through form.[14] Longo's lack of an authentic voice fails to criticize: his paintings of riots seem corny and unrealistic. It is as if Goya chose to put Micky Mouse as the demon in his work, Saturn Devouring His Son, the effect of a Longo painting is a "good" start (a critique of popular movies effect on a culture) expressed in a "dumb" form, like a movie of a movie, not a critique of a movie.

These are only two artists (Haring and Longo), but they are very representational of Post-Modernism. Other artists, like Ronnie Cutrone, who uses John Wayne and a million other cartoon characters, or Dan Friedman, who uses Mr. Peanut, also fail to transcend the American Dream. People shouldn't have to spend their time preoccupied with gimmicks, toys, TVs, or lapel pins. It's this interest that allows society

to continue destroying an environment, send money to the contras and a thousand other things that should not be happening. Post-Modernism doesn't fight this consumer cultural-induced material domination, it affirms it...uses it for personal gain, not for art, or a culture, but for itself. It's not an art of rebellion, but rather an art of confirmation.

There is a Swedish word, kulturbarer, that translates into English as "culture-bearer." Art should lead a culture, like a locomotive engine pulls a train. Robert Pirsig defines this concept in his book, Zen and the Art of Motocycle Maintenance:

> Culture-bearing books (or any art form) challenge cultural value-assumptions and often do so at a time when culture is changing in favor of their challenge. The books are not necessarily of high quality. Uncle Tom's Cabin was no literary masterpiece but it was a culture-bearing book. It came at a time when the entire culture was about to reject slavery. People seized upon it as a portrayal of their own new values and it became an overwhelming success.[15]

In this sense art should lead a culture, in favor of some kind of transcendence through concept or form that "opens a new dimension of experience."[16]

Historically, art has a strong tradition as culture-bearer. "Good" art has always seized upon cultural dissatisfaction and echoed authentic shifts in cultural values. For example, Cubism and Abstract Expressionism did this. Cubism symbolized the changing values surrounding the perception of time and space. During the period of 1880-1918, Western culture changed drastically. Inventions such as the

wireless telegraph, telephone, x-ray, cinema, and automobile were revolutionary in the sense that the old cushion of distance was shortened. Life became an experience of simultaneous events. The old world of separated experience, like the time it took a news story to go from city to city (or America to Europe) was reduced to almost zero. Americans could know about an event almost immediately, even before it was over; when the Titanic was sinking, somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, Americans were sitting by their telephones waiting for developments. There was no longer a here or there, everything could be experienced all at once. Cubism echoes this with its interest in the dissolution/integration of positive/negative form, multiple-perspective, and transparency.[17]

In the 1950's, Abstract Expressionism challenged the prevailing culture, through the expressed themes of "existentialism," "real" freedom of expression, and art as an activity. The "act" of creating was more important than the actual art "object." In '50s culture there was a growing dissatisfaction with the structure of work, like screwing in the same bolt, on the same model of car, forty hours a week, for twenty years. People were beginning to rebel against spending most of their lives in mundane, meaningless jobs, just to make a living. They wanted the work itself to be important, not just a paycheck at the end of the week. Abstract Expressionism also challenged this change in cultural values.

Post-Modernism doesn't lead a culture, it follows one. There is an underlining cultural shift in American culture, which grew strong in the 1960's, with the Protest Movement. The intensity of this "counter-culture" faded in the 1970's but it is still present, like a caged wolverine, ready to attack, if let out of its cage. Authentic art is like this wolverine. But, Post-Modernism acts more as the bars...as containment, keeping the "beast" of change trapped and cornered. When Robert Longo says, "I like to walk around the studio with my guitar and play real loud, it's like meditating on the meaning of art with Jimi Hendrix as the consultant...I always wanted to have a Fender Stratocaster, so I invented this sculptural piece so that I could buy one,"[18] he gets right to the point. Art to him is a means to an end, not a means in itself, not a statement leading Americans, but a statement keeping America trapped within itself. Keith Haring is said to have a strong interest in social causes[19], but he doesn't incorporate any social commentary in his work. When he does things like opening up his "Pop Shop," he demonstrates a greater interest in making a "bundle." He speaks like an artist, but he sounds like a J. C. Penny. When David Salle creates a painting, he isn't addressing any key issues (social or philosophical), but rather as Robert Hughes says:

> (He) mimics the nullifying influence of TV, its promotion of derisive inertia as the hip way of seeing, Underneight, a congealed eroticism, derived from the misogynies of soft porn and misty

> cliches of romance-illustration: on top, a disconnected shuffle of high-art fragments and other visual flotsam. The effect is often sexist and supercilious: porn-in-quotes garnished with irony, the yuppie market's dream.[20]

Post-Modernism isn't leading a culture out of its consumer-dominated society. The rebellious inspiration of high culture is not present in Post-Modernism because it is following the low-culture of popular society.

The last question to ask is, can Post-Modernism succeed? Is it possible for an artist to appropriate from art history as well as the media and fulfill the historical, critical, and transcendent requirements of art? Yes, it can be done. Eric Fischl does this. His work deals with "the crisis of the American Dream," that "smells of unwashed dog, Bar-B-Q lighter fluid and sperm. It is permeated with voyeurism and resentful, secretive tumescence--a theater of adolescent tension and adult anonymity."[21] Fischl "borrows" from art history and American popular culture. In his painting The Sleep Walker (1984), he presents an image of an adolescent boy urinating in a family pool at night. His draftmanship, composition, and paint manipulation echo the form of Eakins or Sargent (who also did portraits of the figure in a family environment, i.e., The Daughters of Edward D. Boit). Fischl takes this image a little farther. His eclectic quotation is that of suburbs, green lawns, and ranch style homes. The difference here is that Fischl doesn't just reproduce the image of contemporary American life, he interrupts it. He totally disregards the imagery

of TV shows like The Partridge Family, The Cosbys, or Leave it to Beaver. What effect would it have on the American psyche if, on the next episode of Leave it to Beaver, Wally would get up out of bed in the middle of the night, and walk downstairs, open the back door and wander out towards the pool, then climb inside, stand knee-deep in water and take a "leak?" Fischl essentially confronts Americans with their own reality, not the unreality of American popular culture. People do sleepwalk and end up urinating in the strangest places. People do go to sleazy motels to have sex...a degrading echo of true sexuality. Fischl uses the popular images to expose, to show people what they really do sometimes, and unfortunately it isn't altogether that pretty.

The art world has been strange these last ten years. It's tone and composition has changed drastically from before. The perception of the artist has changed from that of an eccentric recluse to that of a highly visible media star, for example Keith Haring has appeared on television. Twenty years ago, was DeKooning ever on the Tonight Show, sitting around talking to Jack Parr? Art's form and motivation also seems to have changed from a personal, as well as cultural exploration, expressing commitment to form as well as content, to a rather "empty" narrative echo of the endless confusion of media-induced images. Post Modernism is just like a television set. Just turn on a TV and in one minute you have seen about four different advertisements persuading the viewer to buy several different products.

Just change the channel to the news and in the matter of minutes, the viewer goes around the world. After awhile it all becomes a blur; and before anyone can think of anything beyond an immediate impression of, "Whoa, that soldier just shot that farmer," it's off to the baseball scores. There isn't enough time given to really allow a viewer to go deeper into an issue and that's unfortunate for the poor farmer that was wounded as well as to the viewer, whose government perhaps supports that activity. It just doesn't give people enough time to ask themselves questions like, "Should the United States send military aid to the Contras?" Post-Modernism also does this juxtaposing of countless images that flash across a canvas or wall, that seem to just echo a ride down a busy highway during rush hours, where building, signs, cars...people flash by at 55 or 65 miles per hour.

Post-Modernism is failing because it doesn't give its works enough time...time to reflect and build upon a rich history, time for an authentic appraisal of its culture and time to create an image that leads instead of follows.

Endnotes

[1]Robert Hughes, "Careerism and Hype Amidst the Image Haze," Time June 17, 1985, p. 78.

[2]Peter Frank and Michael McKenzie, New, Used, and Improved: Art for the '80s (New York: Abbeville Press, 1987), p. 28.

[3]Ibid., p. 20.

[4]Ibid., p. 21.

[5]Ibid., p. 109.

[6]Robert Hughes, "Careerism and Hype Amidst the Image Haze," p. 80.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Jean Leymarie, Picasso: The Artist of the Century (Ney York: Viking Press, 1971), p. 148.

[9]Peter Frank and Michael McKenzie, New, Used, and Improved: Art for the '80s, p. 95.

[10]Herbert Marcuse, The Aesthetic Dimension (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), p. 7.

[11]Ibid., p. 11.

[12]Peter Frank and Michael McKenzie, New, Used, and Improved: Art for the '80s, p. 108.

[13]Robert Hughes, "Careerism and the Hype Amidst the Image Haze," p. 80.

[14]Herbert Marcuse, The Aesthetic Dimension, p. 8.

[15]Robert M. Pirsig, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1974), p. xii.

[16]Herbert Marcuse, The Aesthetic Dimension, p. 7.

[17]Stephen Kern, The Culture of Time and Space (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 2.

[18]Peter Frank and Michael McKenzie, New, Used, and Improved: Art for the '80s, p. 24.

[19]Ibid., p. 104.

[20]Robert Hughes, "Careerism and Hype Amidst the Image Haze," p. 80.

[21]Ibid., p. 83.

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